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RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 0675
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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN'S BALKAN PROVINCE: ALUMNI KEEPING THE FLAME
ALIVE IN AN ISOLATED DESERT

REF: ASHGABAT 1074
ASHGABAT 0971
ASHGABAT 0970
ASHGABAT 0968
ASHGABAT 0966

¶1. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

¶2. (SBU) SUMMARY. Meetings with FLEX alumni during a recent trip to Balkan province demonstrated the considerable thirst for greater exposure to the world beyond Turkmenistan's borders. Emboff also met a blind pastor of a still-unregistered evangelical Christian church who, for the first time, is being allowed to leave Turkmenistan so that he can receive an operation to restore his sight; young exchange alumni who are seeking to carry on the Halloween traditions that they learned during their time in the United States; and a young UGRAD alumna having problems getting back into her medical-school program. END SUMMARY.

¶3. (U) During an October 1-2 visit to Balkan to observe the province's cotton harvest (septel), Emboff met with Balkanabat-based alumni of the Future Leaders high school exchange program (FLEX) in the IREX-run Internet Access and Training Program (IATP) Center in Balkanabat, visited the Avaza district of Turkmenbashy City where the government proposes to build a glitzy new resort area, and talked with a Turkmenbashy-based pastor of an unregistered church and with Turkmenbashy-based FLEX alumni.

BALKANABAT: "PLEASE OPEN AN AMERICAN CORNER HERE!"

¶4. (SBU) In Balkanabat, Emboff met with about 12 local FLEX alumni at the city's newly reopened IATP Center. Although the Center -- forced to relocate to its current site as a result of government pressure on its former landlord -- has been open at its current location since late June, it had only gained Internet access two days before Emboff's visit. (NOTE: The director indicated that the Center had been told there was a shortage of Internet lines. END NOTE.) Nonetheless, Center personnel were busy giving lessons on using computers to five teenagers. The director reported that the Center had about 1,200 users, and the Center's average of 50-60 users per day included both young and many older people.

¶5. (SBU) The alumni, many of whom had participated in the 2006-2007 FLEX program, were mostly upbeat about their exchange experiences. They said it had been extremely difficult to return to Turkmenistan -- and especially to the isolation of Balkanabat. They missed exposure to new ideas. Many acknowledged that they had never been to the IATP Center before, and were pleased to hear that they could have cost-free access to Internet there. Noting that Balkanabat is the only provincial capital in Turkmenistan without an American Corner, they pleaded with Emboff to pass on their request to establish an American Corner there, in hopes of increasing their own and others' exposure to the world outside (see para 12 below).

¶6. (SBU) One participant in the session was a UGRAD university exchange program alumna who had returned to Turkmenistan just a few months ago. This alumna, who had been in medical school before she left for the United States, reported that she had not had any success in returning to the medical program that she had interrupted for the exchange program. Her medical school was standing firm in insisting that she needs to work for a year at a government-run medical facility before she will be allowed to return. The young woman reported that she had been unsuccessful in finding a job at a hospital or other medical facility in the Balkanabat region, so she was just staying at home.

¶7. (SBU) All of the FLEX students who just returned from the United States reported they were receiving an extra (10th) year of mandatory education this year. While all expressed support for the increased schooling, they complained that the tenth year curriculum was "boring" and still too raw to be really useful. Notwithstanding their disappointment with the tenth-year curriculum and the cautionary tale that the UGRAD alumna offered, all FLEX alumni were upbeat about the changes that they had seen in their country since

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former President Niyazov's death. All said they were planning to go on to university -- albeit, many at the American University in Central Asia -- so that they could return to Turkmenistan to assist in developing their country.

"WORD OF LIFE" PASTOR CONTINUES TO FIGHT FOR REGISTRATION

¶8. (SBU) In Turkmenbashy, embassy officer met with the pastor of the "Word of Life" (unregistered) minority evangelical Christian group, Timur Muradov. Muradov, who was blinded in a chemical fire 12 years ago, smilingly reported he had some good news: he would travel to Kyiv for eye surgery on October 11, and he fully expected in a few weeks to be able to see the Emboff -- and all his other friends at the Embassy -- for the first time. Less positively, however, he noted that, even though his "Word of Life" group was closely affiliated to the "Source of Life" evangelical group registered just a week ago, the Council on Religious Affairs had told the "Source of Life" pastor that the "Word of Life" group would not be allowed to register. [NOTE: We will follow up. END NOTE.]

STRUGGLING TO CONTINUE OUTREACH WITHOUT AN AMERICAN CORNER

¶9. (SBU) In Turkmenbashy, where the American Corner still has not re-opened after being closed more than a year ago, Emboff met with the American Corner director and eight FLEX alumni who are struggling to keep the Corner's outreach mission alive. These FLEX alumni were much more positive than their Balkanabat peers about their school year. Most, however, were also eager to conclude their extra year of schooling so that they could go to the university, then return to Turkmenbashy to participate in the plan to develop the city's Avaza district into an extravagant resort.

¶10. (SBU) Emboff noted that she had visited the Avaza district that morning, and had seen little indication that the new development project has gone beyond the paper stage. The FLEX students agreed, but stated that already real estate prices are skyrocketing in the city as a growing number of speculators are purchasing residential property in Turkmenbashy City in hopes of being able to cash in. While one of the FLEX students expressed some concern that the Avaza development ultimately would be unsuccessful, due to the absence of any provisions for private-sector involvement, even he believed that

the program would help resuscitate the crumbling port city, which has been slowly going downhill over the last 15 years.

¶11. (SBU) As Emboff left, the American Corner director took advantage of the gathering to begin planning a Halloween event. Following the mayor's refusal to allow the group to hold a party for orphans, as they had done in previous years, she and the group of alumni began planning another way of bringing Halloween to Turkmenbashy.

¶12. (SBU) COMMENT: One of the most important functions of the American Corners is their ability to bring new access to the outside world to Turkmenistan's still-isolated provinces. In most cities, American Corners serve as incubators for encouraging young people to think beyond their current limits, and the FLEX alumni are the greatest evidence of the Corners' success. Post has just submitted a diplomatic request to open a new Corner in Balkanabat and is making progress on re-opening the Corner in Turkmenbashy. In the meantime, post is pleased that the alumni in both cities remain so eager to carry on the American Corners mission. END COMMENT.

HOAGLAND